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## Art Activism and Digital Technologies

Christina Sterbenz  
*Syracuse University*

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# **Art Activism and Digital Technologies**

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at  
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors  
May 2013

Honors Capstone Project in Magazine Journalism

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Date: May 5, 2013

## **Abstract**

The following represents a critical, long-form journalism narrative, exploring the emerging relationship between art, activism, and digital technologies such as social media. These 3,000 words explore the concept using the lens of two large non-profit, social art organizations: The AIDS Quilt and the One Million Bones Project. The former, now an international endeavor, catalogues life in the age of AIDS through a community-driven patchwork quilt intended to raise awareness and funds for HIV/AIDS and allow all those affected by the disease a creative coping strategy. The latter began as a small art installation in Albuquerque, New Mexico with a goal of creating one million plaster-cast bones to display on the lawn of the National Mall in June 2013 as a protest against genocide. These organizations embody art's creative and emotional power to tether people to social issues plaguing the globe. Art, considered a left-brained skill, and technology, a more logical and professional classification, often clash. In a culture where Internet use pervades daily life for more than two billion people, social media and other online forms of communication provide organizations with unique opportunities to expand their reach and effectiveness. Through interviews with individuals involved with these organization as well as experts in field of technology, art, and activism, this article showcases the challenges of the relationship between art activism and new media.



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## Social Media and Social Change

*Seventy-eight percent of art organizations admit the necessity of digital technologies, like a well-designed website and daily tweets. Many of these artistic groups use their online presences to rally audiences behind cause. For some though, activism means more than clicking the “like” button on Facebook or retweeting a link. When more than two billion people use the Internet daily, art activism struggles to adapt.*

By Christina Sterbenz

On a dog day in August, an elderly white woman knelt in a crowd of people on Route 66, a two-lane street winding through downtown Albuquerque, New Mexico. Silver hair twisted into a bun, she placed a handmade bone near the double yellow-line. A few steps away, the wind blew a young black girl’s unruly curls as she hunted a spot for hers. That day, hundreds of other people left their plaster-cast bones lying within the city’s commercial landscape. Tibias, fibulas, rib cages, and skulls transformed the pavement into an alabaster sea, contained only by the parallel curbs. Meant to symbolize a mass grave, 50,000 bones stared back at the sky. As the sun set, the bone-makers, clad in white, lined the street and linked hands.<sup>7</sup>

That day marked the start of the One Million Bones Project (OMB), a social art installation raising awareness of genocide and funds for victims and survivors. For each bone made, the Bezos Foundation donates one dollar. With a goal of one million, OMB will then lay the bones on the lawn of the National Mall in June 2013.<sup>6</sup> But not just the 200-some participants in Albuquerque saw

this event two years earlier unfold. More than 10,000 others witnessed the spectacle—on YouTube. In fact, OMB created its own channel. In the past two years, the organization posted 15 videos, earning them 71 subscribers and about 55,000 views. OMB often tweets these videos and other links from its Twitter account. With a hashtag specific to the cause, #1inamillion, the organization reaches about 1000 followers. And of course, onemillionbones.org gives visitors a chance to donate online, click through a photo gallery of events, and read weekly blogs. Through these various forms of new media, OMB creates a robust online presence, exhibiting a larger trend in the world of art activism.

A January 2013 Pew Research Center study found that 78 percent of art organizations find social media “very important” for increasing audience engagement.<sup>9</sup> With the rise of “slacktivism,” forums like Twitter and YouTube form a natural bond with social art movements. To do good, people need only repost a YouTube video or change their Facebook profile picture. For example, Kony2012, a viral video created by Invisible Children campaigning to indict African militia leader Joseph Kony, landed 100 million views in just 6 days, the speediest rise to viral status ever.<sup>11</sup> But these opportunities come with challenges. OMB’s most-watched video pales in comparison—a little over 50 thousand in three years. Organizations don’t just compete with each other for web browser’s attention either. At times, they struggle to fit their own goals to new, digital technologies. For example, The Names Project Foundation, the non-profit responsible for the creating the AIDS Memorial Quilt, created a web app this year that allows users to view the entire quilt or search squares by name or number.



But, contrary to the name, the AIDS Quilt Touch prevents viewers from touching the community-driven art quilt online. And many moments scrolling the patches on a web browser fails to convey the quilt's magnitude the way display on the National Mall in 1996 did. Julie Rhoad, CEO of the Names Project Foundation, says her organization struggles to use new media in this way. "We're trying to help bridge the gap between touching and feeling and seeing—whether you're dealing with the quilt in-person or in an online application. That's the crux of where we are right now," she says. With Internet use pervading modern culture though, art organizations feel forced to adapt. According to U.S. Census Bureau, more than 2 billion people use the Internet on a daily basis. Alyson Stanfield, founder of the Art Biz Team, a company that coaches artists to use social media, makes no times for complaints or excuses. "Organizations who say 'we can't' are just not using it right," she says. "And the first step is to realize that resources like Twitter are for building relationships." OMB, although headquartered in Albuquerque, connects to organizations across the nation and world to reach its goal of one million bones.

After the bone installation in August 2011 Albuquerque contributed another 100,000 bones, totaling 150,000. Jane McPherson, a native of Tallahassee Florida, heard about the project online and began organizing in her city. According to OMB Florida's Facebook page, Tallahassee's total stands just over 18,000. The group even made a video of its own to promote a city-wide installation. Florida State University, the largest college in the country, reposted it. Now, organizations in 30 U.S. states and 15 countries have pledged their

involvement to OMB. A middle school in Pakistan, unable to afford international shipping, even pledged to draw bones and scan them into computers to send virtually. OMB will represent the two-dimensional renderings in a different way at the installation this June. Currently, the national count stands at 412,000. But six hundred more rest in padded boxes at a local art gallery in Syracuse, New York.

Terrence Smith, a tour fellow from Student's Rebuild, just one of OMB's many national partners, brought the project to Syracuse. As a graduate of Syracuse University, he read about the project online. But instead of just posting a link on Twitter or liking the organization's Facebook page, he took his activism a step further. "Because of Syracuse's history with refugees, I just knew the Community Folk Art Center would be extremely receptive to the project. It just clicked," he says. Almost 1000 new refugees—from countries such as Sudan, Somalia, and the DRC—arrive in Syracuse, a government-designated refugee resettlement community, every year.<sup>2</sup> Committed to promoting and developing the African diaspora in Central New York, the Community Folk Art Center (CFAC) developed a natural bond with the project.<sup>2</sup> Starting October 17, the gallery challenged community members to create 1000 bones of their own to add to the mass grave in D.C. The gallery hosts bone-making workshops, during which community members can visit and create a bone. CFAC provides all the supplies. In October 2012, Smith and Stephanie Roberts, another tour fellow, visited CFAC to host one of these workshops.

Smith and Roberts traveled across the country with a unique task: helping people make bones. Every two days or so, the pair visited a different city to host bone-making workshops. Flanking an industrial folding table in the back room of the CFAC, newspaper ink coated their hands as they rolled the sports and business sections into skeletal shapes. An elderly Polish refugee named Katarzyna soon joined them. She read about the workshop online. Her participation transformed the conversation into a dialogue. As Smith and Roberts discussed the project, they mentioned the word “grassroots.” Katarzyna pushed her glasses—the hinges held together with masking tape—back onto her nose. “What does it mean—‘grassroots?’” she asked. Roberts smiles. “*This* is grassroots,” she explained. “It’s about the everyday person having a say in what’s going on.”

Marit Dewhurst, director of art education at the City College of New York, finds art central to creating a voice for the everyday person. In her 2009 doctoral thesis at Harvard University, she studied the educational value of creating activist art, which she defines as “art created with the explicit intention to impact inequality or injustice.” Through teaching art classes at a community art center, much like CFAC, she deduced a three step process for using art to spread social issues. People connect with a cause, question the status quo, and translate their ideas into artwork.<sup>3</sup> “The artwork then becomes the voice or symbolic stand-in for the people or issue that has been invisible or silent in society,” she says. Dewhurst’s research pivots on “minute moments of discovery and decisiveness.” For example, Kheli Willetts, CFAC’s executive director, says she met a few participants in Syracuse who had never even heard the word genocide.

“Bone workshops provide people with an opportunity to work and talk, to educate each other. And then they’re left with a representative example of the atrocities happening in Africa,” As Carl Wilkens, the only American to stay in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide, said, “When we make something with our hands, it changes the way we think, which changes the way we act.” The Center for Activist Art, a non-profit that aims to make more creative activists and more effective artists, preaches the same concept. Lisa Skeen, workshop coordinator for the center, never met someone who got involved in activism because of a pamphlet of facts. She believes in the power of storytelling, “The way to really reach people is to use stories and symbols and signs and spectacles,” she says. “Those are the things that invigorate and motivate the public.”

In the mid-80s, the AIDS Quilt employed these tactics to force the public to acknowledge the HIV and AIDS epidemic. “I think it is without question, the first piece of social media,” Rhoad says. The quilt traveled to communities in pieces, sparking discussion of the disease. Every square represented a person. Every patch gave clues about their lives. Rhoad recalls moments where coping families or friends felt inspired, on the spot, to create squares. “People are often quick to dismiss the power of the artistic community,” she says. “But we document life in the age of AIDS the way no other organization does. We turn statistics into souls.” Now, with 54 tons of fabric all memorializing individuals who died from the disease, the quilt conveys the magnitude of the AIDS epidemic. The physical quilt covers more than 29 acres of land, and if a person spent only one minute on each panel, viewing the entirety would take 33 days.<sup>1</sup>

The sheer size of the project makes adhering to the same grassroots activism difficult. Anne Balsamo, who teaches courses on interactive media design at the University of Southern California, created the AIDS Quilt Touch in 2012 to commemorate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the quilt. Viewers can see, right on their computer screens, that Donald Edwin Cover, age 36, loved Twix bars. J. Kevin Faricy played the piano and attended Georgetown University.<sup>8</sup> They both died of AIDS. But the web app only showcases 48,000 individual panels with 93,000 names.<sup>1</sup> “To the purists and the people who founded this quilt, the fact that we’re talking about document and media archives as potential primary sources is blasphemous,” Rhoad says. OMB attempts to tackle the same issue—using art and technology to humanize unfathomable tragedies.

Spurred by the genocide in Rwanda, The Second Congo War, also known as the Great War of Africa, lasting from 1998 to 2003, involved as many as eight African nations. As a deadly battle for resources and political control, the conflict, including its precursor, killed 5.4 million people.<sup>10</sup> With 206 bones in the human body, that singular instance of genocide left 1,112 million bones in its wake. In June, one million bones—representative of less than 1/1000 of the true tragedy—will overwhelm the lawn of the National Mall just as the AIDS Quilt did in 1996. “We’re using these bones to represent the gravity of the situation but also a symbol of hope, of our shared humanity. Together, they’re hauntingly beautiful,” says Kathleen McEuen, the national liaison for the project. While the organization’s Twitter feed and webpage encourages people to attend the

installation this summer in D.C., not everyone possesses the resources. But OMB provides alternatives for those still wishing to participate through their website. A tab on the homepage titled “Get Involved” offers visitors the chance to volunteer, create a single bone—and mail the finished product—or host a bone-making event. Lastly, the website provides a page to donate. Much like Obama’s successful political campaigns, OMB’s tactics even involve cell phones—people can donate to the organization by texting 5055. The art world, however, often criticizes total reliance on these slacktivist methods. “People think, ‘Well, I visited this site, and I clicked on this button, and now I’m done,’” Skeen says. While sending a five dollar donation via text or retweeting stats may not tether people to the cause the same way creating a quilt square or bone does, an online presence helps.

In 2012, an infographic on Sortable, a tech website, showed that slacktivists volunteer and give donations twice as often as those who avoid discussing social issues online.<sup>4</sup> For example, in five days, the Red Cross raised 20 million dollars through text donations for the earthquake in Haiti.<sup>4</sup> New tactics like this clash with the AIDS Quilt’s original operation: bringing the quilt into communities and gathering donations in buckets. The study also found slacktivists four times as likely to contact a politician.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, these statistics don’t always translate to reality. The Kony2012 went viral within a week but failed to attract attention from policymakers or government officials. For Stanfield, the success of social media relies on balancing information with providing a service. “Organizations reach out, but they reach out in a broadcast-y kind of way,”

Stanfield says. “‘This is what we’re doing, this is how we’re doing’ instead of ‘this is how we can connect with you, this is what we can do for you.’” For example, the AIDS Quilt’s Twitter, with around 2,300 followers, retweets its mentions but rarely replies. Not to mention the organization tweeted last on December 17. One of Stanfield’s recent tweets showcases her social media savvy. In it, she praised an attendant to one of her recent workshops, complete with a link to her personal instagram. While these technologies provide a good “entry point” for social activism, a newsfeed full of facts misses the relationship that effective social media requires. But many organizations lack the funding or staff required to successfully brand themselves online.

According to the same Pew study, 74 percent of art organizations admit they don’t have the staff or resources to use social media effectively.<sup>9</sup> Still, they do attempt to gain more funding. Forty-nine percent said they sought money that would expand the organization’s use of the Internet or other technologies.<sup>9</sup> Pew’s research included only organizations that received grants from the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) from 2007 to 2011. The NEA may not understand the emerging role of new media in the art world, but recent grants show a willingness to fund research that ties art, activism, and economic prosperity. One example, the NEA awarded the University of Dayton \$15,000 to study the “relationship between arts engagement and quality of life, as reflected by economic well-being and civic engagement patterns.”<sup>9</sup> Studies like this add new information to a sometimes pejorative discussion. “Art activism is thought of as this big, romantic idea. People don’t always take it seriously,” Dewhurst says.

“The challenge is to qualify how art can really change things.” John Eger, director of the Creative Economy Institute at San Diego State University, sees data mining as the solution. “You can’t do it the old way,” Eger says. “By knocking on doors and having coffee and tea. We need to use the technologies available to use.”

Data mining, a relatively new idea outside commercial companies, aims to discover patterns or trends in large sets of data. By gathering information online using cookies—small bits of code saved to computers from websites—organizations and companies can learn web user’s interests, even age and income. Using these survey tactics, Dan Wagner, chief analytics officer for Obama 2012, ran a national campaign more like a local one.<sup>5</sup> He used experimental data collection methods to assess the needs of localities, assembling a winning national coalition vote by vote.<sup>5</sup> Art organizations can use data in the same way for different reasons. For example, by analyzing online shopping, data mining can identify low income communities, most likely comprised of smaller homes. Instead of asking these households to purchase pricey and elaborate oil paintings, an email blast might request five dollars. “But five dollars time 5000 is worth the effort. Using data is so easy and cost effective.” While the AIDS Quilt does focus on digital humanities with projects like the AIDS Quilt Touch, even Rhoad admits the organization needs to be “one of the Googles of the world.”

Richard Florida, world-renowned economist and senior editor at *The Atlantic*, noticed this trend emerging trend 10 years ago with his best-selling business book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. In a strange interim between post-industrialization and technologies fueling the future, Florida writes that creativity



and innovation will unify cities and uphold the global economy. He founded the Creative Class Group, which “empowers communities, organizations and people to harness their innate creativity to achieve greater prosperity and well-being.” An IBM study in 2010 even showed that CEOs selected creativity as the most crucial factor for success in the current economy.<sup>12</sup> As a guest blogger for Huffington Post’s art vertical, Eger explores this topic often. “Most education appeals to the left-side of the brain. So how do you make someone creative? Broadly defined, the arts are an essential vehicle.” Eger also knows now more than ever, people won’t support the arts unless they perform a service. “It isn’t just enough that we turn out a product, it has to be inherently socially uplifting,” he says. Social activism solves this dichotomy. Through new media, social art movements can spread creativity and do good for the world. “Organizations have to expand their audiences, be more proletarian. They have to get more people involved in the arts and in social activism,” Eger says. “That’s the best way of serving society.”

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### **Capstone Summary**

For my Capstone Project, I wrote a long-form journalistic narrative that analyzes and explores the modern relationship between social art movements and digital technologies. I write about these topics through the lens of two specific art movements: the One Million Bones Project and the AIDS Quilt, an endeavor of the Names Project Foundation.

One Million Bones began as a small-scale art installation in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Now an international movement, the project aims to engage local galleries, schools, etc. to create one million plaster-cast bones to display on the lawn of the National Mall in June 2013. The AIDS Quilt has raised awareness and funds HIV and AIDS for 25 years now. As a community-driven, national art movement, the quilt acts as a creative coping method for anyone affected by the HIV and AIDS epidemic. Anecdotes from these organizations will provide tangible evidence of a rarely studied phenomena and also anchor the reader to the narrative. Because of the nature of these two organizations, the article also includes a brief history and perspective on genocide in sub-Saharan Africa and the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Many people, including myself, often complain that Generation Y lacks the same spirit of protest present in previous eras, like the 60s. But instead of songs preaching peace or marches on Washington, 20-somethings use social media to support causes and spread information. With 2 billion people using the Internet daily, social justice must adopt to new media. Consider the viral video campaign Kony2012 which gained 100 million views in only 6 days, a record rise

to viral statys. Also, a record number of tweeters tuned-in to a live discussion of the Inauguration this year on Twitter. Those wanting to do good for the world need only tap into the unique opportunities that digital technologies, like social media, offer. Organizations, like the One Million Bones Project and AIDS Quilt, have begun to adapt to this trend. The AIDS Quilt created a web app this past year to give web users a way to view the quilt online. Digital humanists, like Anne Basalmo, work to integrate digital media archives into the original plan of the quilt: gathering donations in buckets by bringing the quilt to local communities. OMB, an organization arguably still in infancy, has a robust Twitter campaign, using the hashtag #1inamillion. Their website features videos from various events across the country and a well-designed blog updated almost weekly. The Community Folk Art Center, a local gallery in Syracuse dedicated to fostering the African diaspora in Central New York, has pledged its involvement to the project, as well. By linking this local business to a national movement, the article will show what a profound effect technology has on the spread of social ideas.

My methodology for this project, like most journalistic endeavors, includes interviewing both primary, secondary, and expert sources. Listed below, you'll find the names and titles of everyone I spoke with over the past 6 months and a short explanation of their contributions to the article.

Kathleen McEuen, National Liaison for the One Million Bones Project: I began and ended this journey with Kathleen McEuen. She provided me with overall information for the One Million Bones Project as well as specific anecdotes from various installations across the country. Through speaking with her, I understood

OMB's goals and asked future sources how digital technologies, like social media, could help the organization accomplish them.

Beverly Allen, Former consultant to the U.N. International Criminal Tribunal: As my honors reader and an expert in genocidal rape, Professor Allen took an interest in my project from the beginning. I spoke with her on numerous accounts to verify the virility of any facts I found regarding genocide. She also helped me formulate an idea of how digital technologies could assist in spreading awareness of genocide.

Terrance Smith, Students Rebuild Tour Fellow: I spoke with Terrance Smith briefly at a bone-making workshop at the Community Folk Art Center. He explained Student's Rebuild's role in the project as well as how he used social media to bring the project to Syracuse, New York.

Stephanie Reynolds, Students Rebuild Tour Fellow: Present with Terrance at the bone-making workshop. I observed a conversation between her and a refugee attendee to the workshop.

Helina Kebede, Marketing Specialist at the Community Folk Art Center:  
Interview not included.

Jillian Norkanthap, Community Folk Art Center Curator: Interview not included.

Kheli Willets, Community Folk Art Center Executive Director: Kheli provided me with a basic understanding of CFAC's role in the One Million Bones Project. She also explained her personal interest in ending genocide as well as why this community suited the project so well.

JD Stier, Campaign Manager for the RAISE Hope for Congo campaign: Interview not included.

Holly Zahn, Production Coordinator for SU Arts: Interview not included.

Keisha Ducie, participant in a bone-making workshop: Interview not included.

Alyson Stanfield, technological coach and founder of the Art Biz Team: As a technology coach for artists, Alyson's position verifies the need for a specific skill set online to market the arts. She gave me strategies for effectively using social media and digital technologies which I then compared to how art activism organizations use technology now. The contrast allowed me to formulate the idea that while organizations do understand the necessity of an online presence, they struggle to create one effectively.

John Eger, Director of the Creative Economy Institute at San Diego State University: Professor Eger introduced me to the idea of art and creativity benefiting society. Through his guest blog with the Huffington Post, I saw the progression of reporting on art activism and various trends in that sector of social change. He spoke to me about big data, as well, which I explored further through other research.

Julie Rhoad, CEO of the Names Project Foundation: Julie provided the background information for the AIDS Quilt, an endeavor of her non-profit, the Names Project Foundation. My longest interview by far, she spoke to me about the challenges that a community-driven art movement like the quilt faces when trying to adopt to new technologies. By learning how she perceives social media

in her organization's goals, I asked other expert sources, like Alyson Stanfield, how to accomplish these.

Lisa Skeen, workshop coordinator of the Center for Art Activism: As the largest non-profit in the country dedicating to creating political, the Center for Art Activism provided a unique perspective to my piece. Lisa's interview initially contradicted my finding thus far. She seemed very conscious of the necessity of social media in the art world but also quite resistant to its incorporation.

Marit Dewhurst, Director of Art Education at the City College of New York: I spoke with Marit after finding her doctoral thesis at Harvard using the library's ProQuest database. She affirmed the importance of the arts in political activism for my piece.